

Sister's Arrival May Delay Funeral

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The bodies are in the white coffin on the second-floor on the storefront church, waiting to be buried. The funeral was scheduled for today.

But it's uncertain if there will be a funeral today. Red tape had threatened to hold up the visa application for the younger sister of the Salvadoran im- migrant, who, along with her two baby daughters, was killed in a house fire in Huntington Station on Sunday.

For days, relatives had pleaded with U.S. Embassy officials to allow Claudia Patricia Alfaro, 18, who still lives in El Salvador, to attend the funeral of her sister, Betty Alfaro Perichi, 21, and her daughters Jennifer, 23 months, and Katie, 5 months.

Claudia went to the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador on Wednesday but was turned away, even though she had a letter from Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) recommending she be granted the visa, Israel said. Yesterday, she was allowed into the embassy, but her application was initially rejected. Hours later, about 7 p.m., U.S. immigration authorities in Washington, D.C., granted her a highly unusual "humanitarian parole" at the request of Israel.

Relatives hope she can board a plane for New York this morning, although she won't arrive in time for the 10 a.m. funeral. "I am excited. Thank God," said Claudia's mother, Maria Alfaro, 42, after hearing the news from Israel.

However, the family may still postpone the funeral for hours or even until tomorrow while Claudia makes her way to Huntington Station.

"I'm glad that humanity trumped bureaucracy," Israel said last night by cell phone. "I just wish they had made the right decision sooner rather than later."

A spokeswoman for the embassy in El Salvador who did not want to be identified would not comment specifically on the case, but defended the agency's initial decision to reject the visa. She said, in general, people applying for a tourist visa - even those hoping to attend the funeral of a close relative - must show they have sufficient economic and familial ties to their homeland to ensure they will return.

Claudia Alfaro is a law student in El Salvador and has not seen her mother since she immigrated to the

United States in 1987, or her two other siblings since they came in 1996. The emergency visa will allow her to stay in America for two weeks to grieve with her family.

The family will finally be reunited, however sadly, at the funeral. The bodies of Betty Alfaro and her daughters are contained in the same coffin, which arrived at the church on Wednesday for a velorio, a Spanish-style wake of prayer, hymns and mourning that often goes on day and night. Relatives stayed at the church until 3:30 a.m. yesterday and returned hours later.

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